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ABSTRACT

The research reported in this paper is concerned with the social and psychological implications of everyday interaction between graduate students and faculty in the sociology department of a small university. The researchers assumed that form of address is problematic for subordinates in social interaction and is a dilemma whose solution represents an evaluation by the addressor of both the addressed and his relationship to the addressed. The study examines certain characteristics of faculty members--age, authority, eminence, visibility, and years at the university--as potential influences on social distance between themselves and graduate students. Data from questionnaires distributed to graduate students indicate that form of address is especially problematic for subordinates in the academic setting where social structure is fluid and the potential for role strain is great. However, the more advanced graduate students exhibit less formality in addressing faculty and even manifest the ambiguity of their relationships with faculty by avoiding any form of address. (Author/SES)

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"Hey You

A Study of the Social-Psychological Implications of Form of Address*

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The research reported in this paper is concerned with the etiquette of everyday interaction between graduate students and faculty in the sociology department of a small university. Our initial assumption is that the question "How should I address him?" is problematic for subordinates in social interaction. It is a dilemma whose solution represents an evaluation by the addressor of both the addressed and his relationship to the addressed. In short, this dilemma presents a conflict which requires some sort of resolution on the part of the addressor.

A university department provides an ideal setting to investigate the implications of fluid social structure and role strain in relation to solving the problem of form of address. First, the superordinate-subordinate relationships are in constant flux. One function of the department is to produce new professionals and, therefore, the social distance between faculty members and each graduate student is constantly being narrowed as the latter progress through the rites of passage that lead from student to colleague. Secondly, there are reasonably clear institutional hierarchies both with respect to students' passage through a program (pre-M.A.; post-M.A.; Ph.D. qualifying exams passed; and ABD) and the status ranking of the faculty (instructor, assistant, associate and full professor). In addition, form of address is problematic for graduate students because the academic setting provides a variety of forms (Professor, Doctor, Mister or Ms., or first name) that a graduate student <u>can</u> choose from in his interaction with faculty.

We start with the idea that form of address is a function of some type of social distance. Goffman (1967) makes the point by calling form of address "ceremonial distance".

> There appear to be some typical relations between ceremonial distance and other kinds of sociological distance. Between status equals we may expect to find interaction guided by symmetrical familiarity. Between superordinate and subordinate we may expect to find asymmetrical relations, the superordinate having the right to exercise certain familiarities which the subordinate is not allowed to reciprocate. Thus, in the research hospital, doctors tended to call nurses by their first names, while nurses respond with 'polite' or 'formal' address (64).

We intend to investigate what types of social distance are reflected in the subordinate's (graduate student's) solution to the problem: "How should I address him?"

While the literature on the training of professionals is profuse (see for example, Becker et al., 1963; Olesen and Whittaker, 1968; and Jackson, 1970) and some studies have been done on undergraduate-faculty interaction (Wilson and Gaff, 1971; and Thielens, 1971), virtually no investigation has been made of interaction among faculty and students at the graduate level. We find this to be an especially significant void because, as our data indicate, the form of address used in conversations with faculty members appears to be one of the most overt ways in which students symbolically demonstrate their decreasing social distance as they move through a graduate program.

The general plan of the study is to examine certain characteristics of faculty members as potential influences on social distance between themselves and graduate students. Social distance can be thought of as being composed of certain elements such as personal distance, professional distance, and structural distance. "Personal distance" is indicated by age differences; "professional distance" is indicated by measures of eminence; and "structural

distance" is indicated by professorial rank and a measure of authority with respect to graduate students. The types of social distance are then correlated with the forms of address that graduate students report they use in everyday, out-of-class interaction with each faculty member. The forms of address are classified into formal (Professor or Doctor); semi-formal (Mister or Ms.); informal (first name); and a category we are calling "Hey you" (avoidance of any form of address).

Goffman (1967) provides the initial rationale for interest in the "Hey you" or avoidance category.

> Avoidance rituals, as a term, may be employed to refer to those forms of deference which lead the actor to keep at a distance from the recipient and not violate what Simmel has called the 'ideal sphere' that lies around the recipient... Any society could profitably be studied as a system of deferential stand-off arrangements, and most studies give us some evidence of this (Hodge, 1907). Avoidance of other's personal name is perhaps the most common example from anthropology and should be as common in sociology (62-63).

While Goffman takes avoidance as a symbol of deference, we would argue that it is also one common way in which an addressor who is in an ambiguous relationship to the addressed (usually brought about by a recent change in the relationship) solves the dilemma "What shall I call him?". This solution has been opted for time and again by newly weds who avoid any form of address with their parents-in-law, even for years, until the arrival of a grandchild mercifully provides the mutually conforting titles "grandma" and "grandpa".

In general, we hypothesize that the greater the social distance between the addressor and the addressed, the more likely the use of the formal form of address by the subordinate addressor. And, in addition, the more ambiguous

the distance, the more likely the avoidance of any form of address by the subordinate addressor. Ignoring graduate student level for the moment, the operationalized hypotheses are that formal form of address is associated with:

A. personal distance as measured by age of the faculty member;[1]

B. professional distance as measured by eminence of the faculty member;[2]

C. structural distance as measured by the rank of the faculty member and by the authority of the faculty member.[3]

Controlling for graduate student level, we hypothesize that pre-M.A. students will tend to be more formal in their forms of address than post-M.A. students and post-M.A. students will have a greater tendency to avoid any form of address than pre-M.A. students.

The visibility of each faculty member[4] and the number of years on the faculty are also included in the analysis.

Methods

Data concerning the forms of address used by graduate students when interacting with faculty members were gathered by distributing a questionnaire to all full-time and part-time resident graduate students in the Department of Sociology during October, 1971. Of 26 questionnaires distributed, 24 were returned. One post-M.A. student declined to fill out the form while one pre-M.A. student was unavailable at that time. Of the 24 participating graduate students, 17 were pre-M.A. while 7 students had already completed their Masters degree.

The graduate student questionnaire asked the respondent to indicate

how he addressed each faculty member in normal face-to-face interaction outside of class. The graduate students were also given the option of indicating that they did not know a faculty member, that they had no interaction with him, or that they avoided using any form of address in face-to-face interaction. Using the responses in these questionnaires, we assessed how each faculty member was addressed according to the four modes of address in our typology: formal, semi-formal, informal and avoidance of any form of address. Individual and group scores were computed by dividing the number of students who used a particular form of address by the total number of students who interacted with the faculty member or category of faculty members. For example, the Formal Form of Address Score for a particular faculty member would be the percentage of students interacting with him who use the formal (Professor or Dr.) form of address.

Department Structure

Before considering the relationships between faculty distance factors (age, authority, eminence), visibility, and years at the university and the form of address scores, we will examine correlations among our independent variables. This provides some information about the structural make-up of our sample department. The relevant correlations are given in the lower right of Table 1.

Table 1

About Here

Table 1

Correlation Matrix of the

Study Variables

	FORMAL	SEMI-FORMAL	INFORMAL	HEY YOU	AGE	AUTHORITY	EMINENCE	VISIBILITY	YEARS AT THE UNIVERSITY
FORMAL	--								
SEMI-FORMAL	-.25	--							
INFORMAL	-.73	-.12	--						
HEY YOU	-.58	-.12	-.05						
AGE	.74	.05	-.75	-.31	--				
AUTHORITY	.46	.02	-.21	-.50	.02	--			
EMINENCE	.53	.07	-.42	-.36	.33	.53	--		
VISIBILITY	.29	-.09	.14	-.55	-.09	.57	.31	--	
YEARS AT THE UNIVERSITY	.38	.36	-.41	-.42	.66	.07	.18	-.35	--

Of the five independent variables which we measured, the only important correlations appear to be between authority and eminence (.53), authority and visibility (.57), and years at the university and age (.66). Note the relatively small association between faculty members' ages and professional eminence (.33) and age and authority (.02). Likewise, the number of years a faculty member has been in the department is not associated with anything other than his age.

The finding that authority and visibility are associated is to be expected. A faculty member who is on a number of thesis committees committees would be known to more graduate students than one who does not serve on many thesis committees. Also, if the student knows any faculty member, it is likely to be one he has or has had as an instructor. Thus, the more courses one teaches (which would increase his authority score) the more visible he is.

The strong positive correlation between authority and eminence (.53) indicates that our sample department is professionally oriented in the training of graduate students. Those people who are high on professional eminence are the members of the faculty who are on thesis committees, teach graduate courses, and chair the department or the graduate committee. We would expect that our sample department places a high value on research and publishing as part of the training of its graduate students. On the other hand, we would hypothesize that a department which evidenced a negative or no correlation between authority and eminence might be more inclined to emphasize teaching or community participation in its graduate program.

The third association, age and years at the university (.66) is the strongest of the correlations between independent variables. One might at first say that it indicates the obvious: the chances are that if a faculty member has been at the university for twenty years, he is not 30 years old. However, the finding is more subtle than that. It indicates that faculty members do not tend to leave the sample department once they arrive. The explanation for the high correlation is that age and years increase simultaneously. This cannot occur in a department with a large turnover at all ranks.

Structure and Forms of Address

The correlations in the center section of Table 1 reveal that personal distance (age) is the best predictor for the use of formal (.74) and informal (-.75) forms of address. Eminence (.53) and authority (.46) also correlate quite highly with formal form of address. Thus, professional distance (eminence) and, to a lesser degree structural distance (authority), appear to influence the choice of form of address.

Eminence is also inversely correlated with informality of address (-.41). This seems to be a result of the fact that graduate students perceive a small amount of distance between themselves and the non-publishing faculty member.

The relationship between the "Hey you" form of address and visibility (-.55) supports our assumption that form of address is a problematic aspect of social interaction. As visibility increases, the avoidance of using any form of address decreases. Thus, the more graduate students interact with a faculty member, the more basis they have on which to categorize him and then

choose a form of address suitable for that category. The less the faculty member is visible, the more difficulty there is in assessing what deference is due him and the more the graduate students avoid using any form of address. The case of the newlyweds avoiding any form of address with in-laws may be a function of lack of interaction with the in-laws. A newly married person forced into interaction with in-laws, say by living with them, would soon come to a decision as to how to address them.

Graduate students are more likely to avoid addressing a faculty member when the faculty member is low on authority (-.49). The increase of ambiguity as authority decreases might be a function of faculty members being low on authority but high on another distance variable. Thus, the graduate student is unable to easily categorize this faculty member and opts for not calling him anything.

Years at the university is also inversely correlated with avoidance of form of address (-.42). Here the graduate student might be unable to fit the new faculty member into any social category and, therefore, he opts for not using any form of address rather than using what might be an incorrect one.

In sum, we find support for hypotheses A, B, and C. High personal distance, professional distance, and structural distance (authority) all appear to be predictors of the use of formal address. Low personal distance and professional distance also are predictors of informal form of address. There appear to be no good predictors of the use of semi-formal forms. Visibility, years at the university, and authority are all associated with

the use of the "Hey you" form of address. As each of these variables decreased, so the avoidance of using a form of address increased.

Student Level

Up to this point, we have only considered form of address as it relates to faculty distance factors (age, eminence, and authority). In this section, we will include the key distance factor characterizing graduate students -- stage in the graduate degree program. Differences on variables such as age, prestige of undergraduate degree, and so forth vary so little among the graduate students of our sample department that "student level" appears to be the most outstanding factor. Our conceptualization of the problem can be seen in Diagram 1.

Diagram 1

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Graduate student-faculty distance can be seen as a continuum on which the minimum distance occurs at the post-M.A. student level and the instructor faculty rank. Distance between students and faculty increases as one moves toward the pre-M.A. student level and full professor faculty rank. The same thing occurs with respect to faculty age, authority, and eminence.

In this section, we deal with the question of which faculty distance factor graduate students respond to when they select a form of address given their own graduate student levels (pre-M.A. or post-M.A.).[5] In order to do this, we cross-tabulated each of the faculty distance factors with the forms of address controlling for graduate student level.

DIAGRAM 1

Graduate Student and Faculty Social Distance Factors

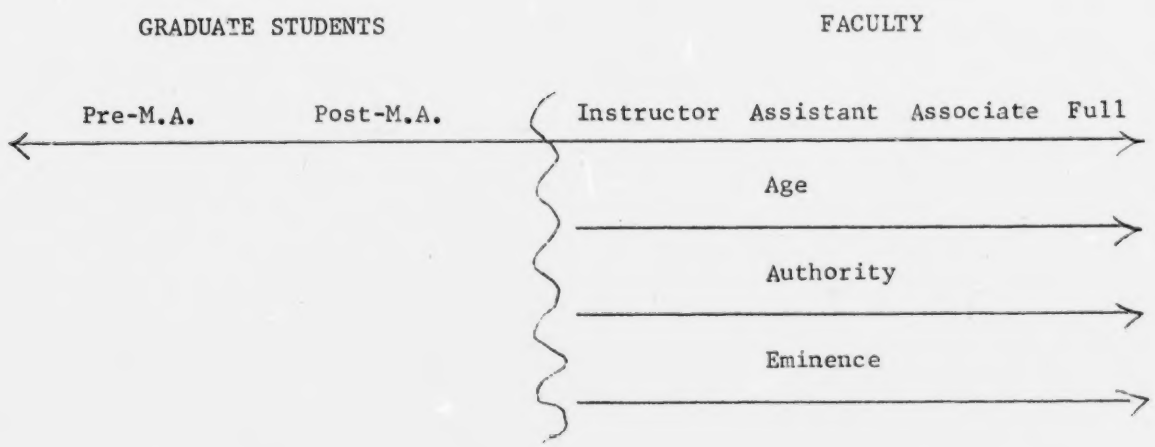

Table 2 indicates that among both pre-M.A.'s and post-M.A.'s, use of formal address decreases as the professorial rank of the faculty decreases. This simply reflects the expected relationship between rank and formality of form of address. Also, as expected, pre-M.A.'s show a general tendency to be more formal. Of special interest are the "Hey you" categories. For pre-M.A.'s, the percent avoiding any form of address increases from 4 percent when addressing full professors to 15 percent when addressing assistant professors to 67 percent when addressing instructors. We would explain this as due to greater ambiguity of distance on the part of pre-M.A.'s with respect to assistant professors, and instructors.[6] Note that for post-M.A.'s the avoidance category is fairly high for all professorial ranks. This appears to reflect "broadening" ambiguity at this stage of the graduate career.

Table 2

About Here

In Table 3, the percentage of graduate students using the formal forms of address decreases as age of the faculty members decreases for both pre- and post-M.A.'s. There are no other distinct trends in this table although we should note again that the percentages in the "Hey you" category are considerably higher for post-M.A.'s.

Table 3

About Here

TABLE 2

Percent of Forms of Address by

Professorial Rank Controlled for Graduate Student Level

		RANK			
		INSTRUCTOR	ASSISTANT	ASSOCIATE	FULL
Pre-M.A.	FORMAL	33	42	78	84
	SEMI-FORMAL	0	8	14	12
	INFORMAL	0	35	0	0
	"HEY YOU" (avoidance)	67	15	8	4
		(N=6)	(N=48)	(N=64)	(N=49)
Post-M.A.	FORMAL	20	30	55	74
	SEMI-FORMAL	0	0	3	4
	INFORMAL	40	45	10	0
	"HEY YOU" (avoidance)	40	25	32	22
		(N=5)	(N=20)	(N=31)	(N=23)

TABLE 3

Percent of Forms of Address by

Professors' Age Controlled for Graduate Student Level

		Age*		
		LOW (40 or lower)	MEDIUM (41-50)	HIGH (50+)
Pre-M.A.	FORMAL	50	79	86
	SEMI-FORMAL	10	14	5
	INFORMAL	24	0	0
	"HEY YOU" (avoidance)	16	7	10
		(N=70)	(N=76)	(N=21)
Post-M.A.	FORMAL	31	63	78
	SEMI-FORMAL	0	5	0
	INFORMAL	41	3	0
	"HEY YOU" (avoidance)	28	29	22
		(N=32)	(N=38)	(N=9)

*Categories formed by natural breaks in the data.

The distinguishing feature of Table 4 is the weakness of faculty member authority as a clear predictor of formality for both pre- and post-M.A.'s. The trends with respect to the avoidance category for both pre- and post-M.A.'s mirror those in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 4

About Here

Finally, Table 5 shows that among both pre- and post-M.A.'s there is a distinct break between medium and low eminence in the percentages who use the formal form of address. In other words, the jump from low to moderate eminence is the critical point with respect to a greater likelihood of being addressed formally as Dr. or Professor by graduate students. Again, post-M.A.'s show a general tendency to be less formal and reflect

Table 5

About Here

more ambiguity (greater percentages of "Hey you") than pre-M.A.'s.

In summary, the analysis by level of student shows that:

1. Rank and, to a lesser extent, age are good predictors of formality of address among both pre- and post-M.A. graduate students. They appear to be the factors students respond to most when choosing a form of address.
2. Post-M.A.'s show a general tendency to be less formal than pre-M.A.'s.

TABLE 4

Percent of Forms of Address by

Professors' Authority Controlled for Graduate Student Level

		Authority*		
		LOW	MEDIUM	HIGH
Pre-M.A.	FORMAL	60	60	85
	SEMI-FORMAL	10	11	13
	INFORMAL	10	21	0
	"HEY YOU" (avoidance)	21	8	2
		(N=62)	(N=53)	(N=52)
Post-M.A.	FORMAL	53	45	58
	SEMI-FORMAL	3	0	4
	INFORMAL	19	27	8
	"HEY YOU" (avoidance)	25	27	29
		(N=32)	(N=22)	(N=15)

*Categories formed by natural breaks in the data.

TABLE 5

Percent of Forms of Address By

Professors' Eminence Controlled for Graduate Student Level

		Eminence*		
		LOW	MEDIUM	HIGH
Pre-M.A.	FORMAL	49	85	81
	SEMI-FORMAL	9	13	14
	INFORMAL	21	0	0
	"HEY YOU" (avoidance)	20	2	5
		(N=76)	(N=54)	(N=37)
Post-M.A.	FORMAL	33	68	72
	SEMI-FORMAL	3	0	6
	INFORMAL	31	9	0
	"HEY YOU" (avoidance)	33	23	32
		(N=39)	(N=22)	(N=18)

* Categories formed by natural breaks in the data.

3. Pre-M.A.'s evidence increasing ambiguity (greater percentages in the "Hey you" category) as faculty distance factors decrease.
4. Post-M.A.'s show a general tendency toward increased ambiguity (greater percentages in the "Hey you" category) regardless of faculty distance factors.

Discussion and Conclusions

Our primary assumption at the outset was that form of address is problematic for subordinates in some situations. Our data indicate that this is indeed true in the academic setting which we investigated, where social structure is fluid and the potential for role strain is great. How faculty are addressed by graduate students depends upon social distance factors -- especially, personal distance (age) and one component of structural distance (rank). It is possible that age is important because it is a traditional source of deference. At least in this particular academic setting, longevity breeds deference from graduate students more surely than any other factor we measured. Rank is probably a good predictor of formality because, along with age, it is a clearly established and well known property of each faculty member. In short, age and rank are relatively easy properties to discern and apply in categorizing faculty members and solving the dilemma of how to address them.

The idea of clarity has important implications for the other major findings of our study. As one would expect,the further graduate students progress in the degree program, the less they exhibit formality in interaction with faculty. But, importantly, as students progress, the more they

tend to manifest the ambiguity of their relationships with faculty by avoiding any form of address. One could translate this finding in terms of one of the principles of conflict resolution: when faced with conflicting action alternatives, one form of resolution is to avoid taking any action at all.

We do not intend to conclude our study with a litany bemoaning the afflictions of graduate apprenticeship. However, our data appear to show that graduate students are subject to the discomforts of increasing conflict with respect to the form of address dilemma as they approach collegial status with faculty. Virtually anticipating our results, one avowed functionalist in the department suggested the need for more clarity in the form of explicit norms governing faculty-graduate student interaction at each of the departmental rites of passage. On the other hand, individually wrestling with the dilemma of "What should I call him?" may in itself be an important part of the professionalizing experience.

One should bear in mind that this research is intended to be an exploratory study. One problem is the small numbers of graduate students and faculty involved. Results could arise from the idiosyncrasies of particular faculty and students or from other small sample instabilities. However, the broad consistency of the patterns described using different measures of distance suggest that the findings are not just fortuitous. Questions to be asked in possible replications include: Do the same relationships hold in different departments within a single university? How do sociology departments at other universities of varying size and prestige

differ? And, more broadly, how do different departments at different universities vary?

Finally, we would like to suggest that research into forms of address might be profitably pursued with special attention to the problems of status transformations such as those presented by passage through a graduate program, moving up a formal organizational ladder, or a wedding ceremony.

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Footnotes

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1. Age was determined by birth dates listed in professional directories.
2. An eminence index was constructed by listing the number of articles by each faculty member cited in Sociological Abstracts, 1947-1971 and by compiling other professional contributions such as edited chapters or books, joint books, and sole books. These indicators were weighted and summed to create the index. A similar index is being used by Murray Straus and Arnold Linsky in their research on college teaching evaluations.
3. Authority was operationalized as being the amount of control a faculty member has over the progress and process of graduate students in the graduate degree program. Data on chairmanship of the department, chairmanship of the graduate committee, membership on the graduate committee, chairmanship of thesis committees, membership on thesis committees, teaching required graduate courses, and teaching elective graduate courses over the past three academic years were collected. These indicators were then weighted and summed to create the index of authority.
4. A visibility score was computed by dividing the number of graduate students who indicated they interacted with a faculty member by the

total number of our population of graduate students.

5. It was necessary to collapse graduate students into these categories due to lack of enough cases in the ABD category.
6. There was only one instructor. This is the only cell in the tables with only one case.